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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 233 (2016) 53 – 57

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

Annual International Scientific Conference Early Childhood Care and Education, ECCE 2016,
12-14 May 2016, Moscow, Russia

Fairy-tales for modern gifted preschoolers: developing creativity, moral values and coherent world outlook

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Abstract

The article gives the outline of a case study supported by Southern Federal University and conducted in a number of pre-school educational establishments in Rostov-on-Don, Rostov Oblast and Sochi (South of Russia) in 2010-2016. The research included several stages: detecting gifted preschoolers (by using inventories for kids and their parents) and providing pedagogical support for overall development of their world outlook and values. The authors describe a systematic approach to developing giftedness which includes use of fairy-tales, active gaming technologies and work with letters. The above techniques contribute to harmonious psychological and cognitive development of preschoolers.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of ECCE 2016.

Keywords: world outlook; pre-schoolers; giftedness; cognitive abilities; values.

Introduction

Eminent children have been born throughout the history of mankind. For nearly a century so far, educators have been trying to detect, comprehend and explain giftedness as well as to find ways for its efficient development. As modern researches state, high aptitudes or gifts can be observed more easily and directly in young children because at this stage of their development environmental influences and systematic learning have only a slight impact on children's abilities [1]. In this respect, work with gifted preschoolers is of special importance. The Federal State Educational Standard of Preschool Education of Russia stipulates that kindergartens should focus on developing children's cognitive interests, inquisitiveness and motivation. In terms

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of systematic value-oriented and activity-based approaches the modern preschool education model assumes that children gain knowledge about the world around through different types of activity.

Growing up in the information space, modern children should learn not only about the outer, evident properties of the objects and phenomena that surround them, but also get to know deeper relations between them. Experiencing the world around, a modern child gets a wide range of impressions as a result of perceiving reality via modern technologies at a high speed and in bright images, but with unexpected foreshortenings. Opportunities offered today by cinema, television and computer games, on the one hand, cause many-sided, comprehensive cognition of objects and phenomena of the world around. On the other hand, this perception of reality is frequently superficial and simplified. This contradiction prompted us to work out a system of activities appealing to children (using cartoons, visual aids, computer games, etc.) to be used not only as illustrative material, but also as stimuli for creative and critical thinking about the world around.

As for the theoretical and methodological background, the given case study is based on the model of giftedness, worked out by J. Renzulli and called the “three-ring” model [2]. According to the researcher, three intertwined components, such as intellectual abilities, motivation (zest) and creativity form an apparently gifted individual. This concept was further elaborated by A.M. Matyushkin who also touches upon the issue of giftedness from the point of view of an individual’s creative potential [3]. He takes a look at creativity as a crucial condition for development, a fundamental feature of one’s mentality. As for the structural components of endowments, in this respect, he resorts to the dominating role of cognitive motivation and creative research expressed in detection of something new, aimed at finding solutions to problems. Research activity is stimulated by a novelty that a gifted child sees and finds by himself in the world around. Giftedness stipulates an ability to create new ideas and search for original solutions.

The given research is aimed at the following objective: to provide theoretical grounds, develop and implement a model of pedagogical support for developing a coherent world view in gifted preschoolers. The main aim is to encourage creativity, make children aware of cultural values and provide a gradual transition from their naïve world view to a scientific picture of the world.

1. Methods

As for the scope of the study, it was conducted in 2010-2016 in a number of preschool educational institutions of Rostov-on-Don, Bataysk and Sochi. Over this period, more than 200 preschoolers aged 5-7 and their parents took part in the research which included several stages. At the first preliminary stage the gifted kids were selected by using multiple diagnostic tools such as: diagnostics of children's giftedness for parents by the American scientists I.G. Hall, N. Skinner adapted to Russian kindergartens by Yu.Z. Gilbukh [4], methods for detecting giftedness by V.S. Yurkevich, adapted for a kindergarten [5], the Gilford Test adapted by I.S. Averina and E.I. Shcheblanova [6], the system for identification of giftedness by A.I. Savenkov [7].

As soon as a child was identified as gifted, he/she became a participant of the pedagogical and psychological support program which was provided by the pre-school organization they were part of. The program of pedagogical support included 3 main types of activities: work with fairytales (the classical stories about Speckled Hen, Little Red Riding Hood and ancient parables); drama techniques and action games; games with letters.

Children who participated in the research underwent diagnostic procedures twice: at the age of 5-6 when they just entered the program of giftedness development and at the age of 7, after taking part in the program and just before going to school. The initial score was compared to the final score. 87 % of the kids who participated in the program of pedagogical support showed higher scores at the final stage of the research (the scores ranging from 45 to 60 %).

Regarding the main criteria of development of the coherent world outlook, the following aspects were taken into account:

- Preschoolers' ideas about the world: a clear understanding of the connection between world realia, abstract concepts and categories, systematic knowledge about nature, culture and society, an awareness of interrelations and interdependence;
- Emotional and value-related attitudes and behavior (a child is able to define the value background of objects and phenomena in the world, pointing out their key features);
- Socio-cultural experience: ideas concerning the world of moral issues, interaction with phenomena and objects of the world around, independent productive kinds of activity; aspiration for creative self-realization;
- Mental abilities: a high level of self-education, inquisitiveness, attentiveness, well developed imagination; the preschooler is able to analyze, compare, classify, generalize, estimate facts and phenomena, have well-grounded judgments; a high level of focus on the set problem, an ability to accept and understand it, readiness for problem-solving; preliminary planning of an activity (games, drawings, studying any aspect of reality).

3. Results and discussion

Now we would like to dwell on the types of activities used in the pedagogical support of gifted preschoolers. Let us begin with the techniques of working with fairytales. A fairytale is the ultimate source of wisdom and moral values. By making children familiar with classical plots, teachers open a whole world of profound ideas to them. Our research brought us to the following conclusion: children beyond all exceptions believe in what they hear in fairy tales. None of them asks if the story is true. Kids might ask if the character is kind or evil, mean or generous. This feature of perception contributes to the development of moral aspects. Children find out what is good and evil in life and accurately define their attitude towards them, thus, moral aspect of the world outlook being shaped. Moral dilemmas from childhood stories remain relevant later in life for adults, but kids can find answers in the space of the Magic Country. So, he/she learns not to enter the country of evil forces and to distinguish good from evil, gaining wisdom, reflecting on complicated life issues. Understanding the idea that purely good and evil characters exist only in fairy tales allows children to build up relationship with peers. They come to understand that at different life periods either good or bad qualities prevail in each person and that to err is human.

The research shows that work with fairy tales becomes efficient in terms of teaching moral aspects to preschoolers as long as it is well structured. Kids should be taught to perceive the deep meaning of fairytales. For instance, the classical story about the Speckled Hen is full of symbolism, comprising archetypes of the collective unconscious. Grandfather is an archetype embodiment of decisiveness (he is always the first to begin difficult tasks), Grandmother is a symbol of the female role in the family (she concedes superiority in the solution of difficult questions to the man), The Hen is a source of knowledge, it invites to resolve a task – to break an egg, and not to give up in case of failure, the Mouse is a embodiment of egoism, etc. Telling children parables also has deep implications. Participants of the research especially liked the story about the turned stone: “One wandering seeker of truth saw a big stone with the sign on it: turn over and read. It took the man great efforts to turn the stone over. As he did it, he read on the other side: why you look for new knowledge if you don't pay attention to what you know already?” The interpretation of the text made it possible to come to the conclusion that at first it is necessary to learn to take a close look at events around us, progressively going from facts to conclusions. The children remembered the stones at the crossroads from fairytales, being various ways to achieve goals.

Interpretation of the texts of fairy tales and parables allows the child to get to know with the Do's and Don'ts of behavior in society. There is a natural connection between bans violated by fantastic heroes and children's violation of adults' bans. By breaking bans a child seeks to find out the degree of adults' dissatisfaction with this or that offense. Sometimes a child pretends to violate the rules: “If I didn't obey you and ran away into the forest, what would you do?” (Masha K.). They make experiments with adults' feelings which can be confirmed by the following statements: “I don't put my toys into their right places even when mother tells me to because I don't

want the fairy tale I invented to finish” (Alina K.). Statements like this confirm a mismatch between the inner world of the child and the pragmatic world of adults. The knowledge about the system of human relationships in fairy tales facilitates children to understand human relations in real life. Attention to the consequences of breaking laws and norms in fairy tales allows them to learn to predict possible scenarios in daily life and gain experience of building more competent relationships with peers and adults. It is an indicator of children’s holistic world outlook since they learn to establish various cause-and-effect linkages, existential and other dependences between certain aspects of reality.

The fairytale dramatization method proved to be one of the productive tools in developing creative imagination. Children play the parts of the main characters in stories, role play relationships between them. The plot of a familiar fairy tale helps them to understand the cause and effect relations and the existential background of the fairytale. Preschoolers get actively involved in these kinds of activity and eagerly play different parts. This is where original thinking is revealed as kids on their own initiative describe what happened after or after the mouse broke the golden egg, coming up with plots with happy endings. The technology of integrating drama techniques and active games makes it possible to expand children’s implications concerning dependence of the inner state of a person and his/her movements. Thanks to the game exercises, such as “I stand straight and free”, “I am flexible and flow smoothly in life”, and “I keep balance”, children have learned to perceive their body as a harmonious whole which at the same time is a part of the universe. Establishment of categorical relations between a part and the whole (in 95% of children) demonstrates understanding of a person’s natural ties with nature. Motivational and game exercises, such as “I create my life”, “I can make everything that I want” become significant for children in the course of their preparation for independent activity which demands concentration and attentiveness. They did them without being prompted, which demonstrates establishing connection between the idea of movement and the achievement of a positive result at work.

The work on fairytales was followed by listening to music from their favorite fables and natural sounds which tell stories about nature, people, their experiences, feelings, interaction with each other and the world around. After listening to music, the preschoolers got involved into discussions about its meaning and emotional coloring. Doing gentle movements to the music allowed children to learn to concentrate, to accept and understand its influence on people’s mood. After listening, the teacher suggested that the children try to catch birds singing, get aware of the sounds of flowing streams, the patter of rain, the roar of mountain springs and the incessant movement of oceans and seas in musical sounds. The impact of nature’s harmonious music on the children’s emotional state was significant. The preschoolers learnt that music can revitalize them, get into the depths of their souls, shedding light on the existing questions of interaction with the world. They said they had come to understand the following connections: “Everything in nature is music” (Nastya Z.); “Nature sings in different voices – foliage rustle, wind noise, birds chant” (Misha K.). In the course of the research, we found out that children are really sensitive to the harmony of nature reflected in the sounds of music. Further teachers suggested that participants should reflect the evolved feeling of integrating an artistic and motive image in movements. Some children created their own plot (“I am a fairy of the stream and I protect every creature who lives in it and nearby” (Lena A.). Others just performed a number of gestures and movements. After classes like this, children become more aware of what is going on in nature, notice the ongoing changes (both positive and negative), and seek to help plants and animals.

The third set of techniques for working with gifted preschoolers concerns exercises with letters which started with listening tasks and proceeded to writing. We noticed that many gifted children who took part in the project began to derive pleasure from using their native language. They listened with great interest to the pronunciation of words, phrases, sought to reveal deeper meanings by tracing letters, combining sounds and letters in words, enjoying every single moment. Finding a connection between sound, letter and concept caused their delight in, admiration and thrill at being able to meet the challenge of deciphering. The teacher guided pupils in finding the “image” of every letter in the Russian alphabet, finding its “character”. Thus, the letter A is really tall, it aspires high and if we pronounce it with a rising pitch in our voice, it describes it best. The Russian letter П (P in

English) is associated with peace and quiet, something “put under or hidden somewhere”. Gradually, the pleasure of independent learning of the deep meaning of words gradually developed into inquisitiveness when the children started asking to look up a word in the dictionary to be sure that they understood it correctly. While learning to write letters, the preschoolers tried to decorate them with curls, flowers, spirals and national ornaments. The teacher didn't offer a special task on decorating letters, but children aspired to it on their own. While decorating letters, the preschoolers associated them with the plots and characters of familiar fairytales. During the program, kids played with tridimensional letters and tried to represent them with movements, gestures, to find their images in the structure of the human body (the letter “A” is similar to a finger or the person with one’s hands lowered freely). It contributed to the development of original spatial thinking and a steady interest in the world of words.

4. Conclusion

The research presented in the article offers an integrative model of teaching preschoolers. It enables creation of an elaborate picture of the world in gifted kids. Understanding the meaning of signs and symbols of the world around opens vast horizons to children. They begin to feel like successors of the past eras. There is a spiritual bond between generations supporting the child in his knowledge of a complete world view and creating the fully-fledged personality of a growing person. Understanding the language of written signs, music, fairy tales and dances promotes discipline and feeds imagination, reveals connections that exist in the Universe and the unity of values (Beauty, Love, Good, and Knowledge). In our opinion, this kind of development is of special importance in the modern world where eternal values are becoming gradually eroded. The above system provides overall development of cognitive, creative and moral aspects of developing personalities. It enables children to integrate the real and the figurative, build the right hierarchy of objects, phenomena of reality and a system of cultural values, it teaches them about natural connections that exist in our life and encourages their skills for independent search and critical thinking.

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